

Responding to False Ideas About Christmas

Part 1: Jesus Wasn't Born on December 25th

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Why do we celebrate on December 25th? The reasons involve Christmas' connection to the dates for Jesus' death, ancient ideas about the life cycle of "great men," the Annunciation, and the birth of John the Baptizer.

Put simply, Christmas is December 25th because the Annunciation is March 25th: Jesus is born nine months after His conception. Why is the Annunciation March 25th? There were two reasons. **One** was the idea that God governs history and that dates matter. The date of Jesus' death was important, and the idea was that truly great persons died on their conception or birth dates so that the person's life was a perfect cycle. Alexander the Great had, for example, literally died on his birthday. Wasn't Jesus greater? It was most appropriate for Jesus to have been conceived on His death date, March 25, which corresponded to the 14th of the Hebrew month Nisan. Tertullian, in about 197, wrote that Christ died on the cross "in the month of March, at the time of the Passover, on the eighth day before the calends of April." ("Calends," the root of our word calendar, is the first day of the month.) Tertullian says Jesus died on the 25th of March. In fact, Hippolytus says in his *Chronicon* that the earth was created on March 25, 5500 B.C. March 25 was identified as the date of the Annunciation and the date of the death of Christ. God is Master of time with a family plan for all peoples.

If today we find these arguments far from compelling, **the other (and much more important) reason** is that we can calculate the Annunciation by establishing the date of the conception of John the Baptizer, which Scripture tells us was six months before the Annunciation (Luke 1:26, 36, 56). St. Luke, who gets his information from Mary herself, describes Saint Zachariah in the temple. He thus gives us the approximate conception date of John. Zachariah served, Luke tells us, in the "course [or "division"] of Abias" (1:5). The course was the assigned cycle or schedule, your family's turn to serve. Scripture gives this as the eighth course among the twenty-four priestly courses (Neh. 12:17). Each shift of priests served one week in the temple twice a year. The course of Abias served during the eighth week and the thirty-second week in the annual cycle. Josef Heinrich Friedlieb has shown that the first priestly course of Jojarib was on duty during the destruction of Jerusalem on the ninth day of the Jewish month of Av (*Leben J. Christi des Erlösers*. Münster, 1887, p. 312). The priestly course of Jojarib was on duty, then, during the second week of Av. So the priestly course of Abias (Zachariah's course) served during the second week of the month of Tishri,

which was the week of the Day of Atonement on the tenth day of Tishri (somewhere between September 22 and October 8). Zachariah and Elizabeth would have conceived John the Baptizer right after Zachariah returned from serving his course. This means John the Baptizer would have been conceived around the end of September, placing John's birth at the end of June. And when do we celebrate *that* event? On June 24th! For Jesus' birthday, just add nine months.

So as St. Augustine says in *De Trinitate* 4,5:

For Christ is believed to have been conceived on the 25th of March, upon which day also he suffered; so the womb of the Virgin, in which he was conceived, where no one of mortals was begotten, corresponds to the new grave in which he was buried, wherein was never man laid, neither before him nor since. But he was born, according to tradition, upon December the 25th [Cf. *Sermon* 202].

St. Telesphorus (bishop of Rome from 126-137) instituted the tradition of Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. The *Liber Pontificalis* doesn't give the date of Christmas, yet it assumes that Christmas is *already being celebrated* and Midnight Mass was simply being added. Theophilus (115-181), bishop of Caesarea in Palestine, wrote: "We ought to celebrate the birthday of Our Lord on whatever day the 25th of December shall happen" (Magdeburgenses, Cent. 2. c. 6. Hospinian, *De origine Festorum Christianorum*). Sextus Julius Africanus (160 – 240) in his *Chronographiai* speaks of Jesus' birth on December 25th. St. Hippolytus (170-240) wrote this in his *Commentary on Daniel*:

The First Advent of our Lord in the flesh occurred when He was born in Bethlehem December 25th, a Wednesday, while Augustus was in his forty-second year, which is five thousand and five hundred years from Adam. He suffered in the thirty-third year, March 25th, Friday, the eighteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, while Rufus and Roubellion were Consuls.

We have good reason for celebration our Lord's Nativity when we do. "Unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given!"

Suggested Reading:

Benedict XVI. *The Spirit of the Liturgy*. Ignatius Press, 2000.

Marshall, Taylor. "Yes, Christ Was Really Born on December 25: Here's a Defense of the Traditional Date for Christmas."

<http://taylormarshall.com/2012/12/yes-christ-was-really-born-on-december.html> .

Talley, Thomas J. *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*. 2nd Ed. Pueblo Books, 1991.